

## **Script as a potential demarcator and stabilizer of languages in South Asia**

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South Asia is rich not only in languages, but also in scripts. However, the various roles script can play in this region have been only marginally explored. Besides an overview of the most important examples from South Asia in which script has contributed to the strengthening or weakening of a language, or to the classification of a tongue as a language or dialect, this paper offers first inputs for a discussion on the role of script today in smaller speech communities which lack a long literary tradition. Especially in cases of script invention, script is not only allocated the role of an identity marker for the speech community, but seems to be expected to strengthen the language itself, and finally to act as a preserver of the minority language.

**1. INTRODUCTION.** Given that South Asia is the region with the highest density of scripts in use, it is not surprising that script plays an outstanding sociolinguistic role in that part of the world. Among the South Asian states, India hosts the majority of these scripts. On current Indian rupee notes

alone, we can find ten scripts<sup>1</sup> corresponding to the 22 languages<sup>2</sup> listed in the Eighth Schedule<sup>3</sup> of the Indian Constitution plus the Roman script, which is used not only for English but also for languages of South Asian origin such as Konkani and Santali.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there are other scripts which have either official status only in a state of the Indian Union but not at the national level, or no official status at all but nonetheless play a major or minor role in the daily life of people. Though other South Asian countries host far fewer scripts, or can even be considered monoscriptal (e.g. Pakistan), it is still necessary to consider the Indian Subcontinent as a whole. Some languages are spoken in more than one country and, sometimes, only by analyzing their situations across state borders can the importance of script be revealed; that is the case of Punjabi, for instance, which shall be discussed in this article. I argue that script in South Asia is an important identity marker for many speech communities; it can play a role, above all, in demarcating languages from each other, and might thus even prevent a language from being categorized as a dialect of another language. Furthermore, a unique script can contribute to stabilizing a language with regard to its literary production and functional role. While these functions seem to be true for major South Asian languages, as will become apparent below, agents of smaller languages have also discovered the potential of script. This has led to the invention and rediscovery of scripts for various languages over the last century. This paper gives an overview of the various roles script can play in South Asia, and queries whether script can also be instrumental in stabilizing minor South Asian languages.

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<sup>1</sup> The following scripts feature on the Indian currency note: the Assamese/Bengali script and the Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Oriya, Gurmukhi, Tamil, and Telugu scripts. Kashmiri and Urdu are represented by variants of the Perso-Arabic script, whereas Hindi, Konkani, Marathi, Nepali, and Sanskrit by Nagari.

<sup>2</sup> The following languages (spelt here according to the Indian Constitution) are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu (Government of India 2008: 330); of those, the following languages are not yet represented on the Indian currency note: Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Santhali, and Sindhi.

<sup>3</sup> Languages which are listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution are entitled to state support in various fields, e.g. subsidies for printing books and the preparation of textbooks for schools.

<sup>4</sup> For the sake of readability, I will use anglicized transcriptions of South Asian language and script names.

## 2. THE GURMUKHI SCRIPT: DEMARCATING AND STRENGTHENING PUNJABI.

One of the most prominent examples of the importance of script refers to a language which is native to India and Pakistan. Punjabi, an Indo-Aryan language, is spoken mainly in the region of Punjab, which, since 1947 (the year of British India's independence and the creation of the state of Pakistan), has been divided between these two countries. While religion was the driving force in establishing Pakistan as a state for the Muslims of British India (whose leaders feared discrimination in a Hindu-majority India), the distribution of the three writing variants of Punjabi – Nagari,<sup>5</sup> a variant of the Perso-Arabic script and Gurmukhi – is today also based mainly on religious differences. Gurmukhi, a modified Landa script, is currently associated exclusively with Punjabi, but the origin of this script owes to the formation of a new religion, which we nowadays know as Sikhism. Sikhism is strongly influenced by Sufism and other local religious forms today mostly categorized under Hinduism (cf. Oberoi 1995). In addition to the central role of a Guru (ten altogether), the preference for religious teachings in local languages was another notable feature. At that time (15th-17th century), Sikh gurus used this practice in order to be more in line with Sufism, and with Bhakti movements which constitute devotional forms of Hinduism. From today's perspective, Sikhism could easily have been subsumed under these categories as well had it not been for its holy book.

In the holy book of the Sikhs – the *Adi Granth* – we find hymns composed in several languages, for instance Braj Bhasha, Hindi, Persian and Sanskrit, but overwhelmingly Sadhukkari, and only to a lesser extent Punjabi (Wessler 2009: 92). It was the Gurmukhi script chosen by the second Sikh guru, Angad (1504-1552), which actually helped this new religion to demarcate itself from other religious movements. In hindsight, the use of the Gurmukhi script seems to be one of the most important decisions for the consolidation of the Sikh religion. Pashaura Singh comments on it:

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<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as "Devanagari". By using the term "Nagari", I follow authors like King (1994) and Rai (2001). The main reason for preferring Nagari over Devanagari is that, though Devanagari is used in manuscriptology to differentiate this Northern script style from the Southern Nandinagari, in modern terminology the term *deva* (Sanskrit 'god, godly') has been applied to *nāgarī*, the name form common previously, to give this script a divine aura (resulting from the nearly exclusive Western Orientalist use of Nagari to print Sanskrit) and hence a status of superiority in relation to other scripts in India.

The use of the Gurmukhi script added an element of demarcation and self-identity to the Sikh tradition. In fact, language became the single most important factor in the preservation of Sikh culture and identity and became the cornerstone of the religious distinctiveness that is part and parcel of the Sikh cultural heritage. (Singh 2004: 81f.)

Interestingly, and even though the *Adi Granth* combines several languages (as detailed above), Singh here equates script with language, thus providing an unconscious example of one of the widespread identity-creating functions of script in South Asia. Indeed, in the course of time, Gurmukhi has become intrinsically linked to the native language of the overwhelming majority of Sikhs, namely Punjabi.

With around 60 million speakers<sup>6</sup> (44.15 percent of Pakistan's population, cf. Government of Pakistan 1998a, 1998b), today Punjabi is for the larger part spoken in Pakistan, where it is written in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script called *Shahmukhi* – literally 'from the Shah's mouth'. In India, it is the native language of barely 30 million people (Government of India 2001) who mostly write it in Gurmukhi, whereas only a minority of Punjabi Hindus uses the Nagari script for Punjabi (if they write in this language at all). We can only speculate about what the present situation of Punjabi in South Asia would have been without the introduction of Gurmukhi. But, judging from today's situation of Punjabi in Pakistan, we can at least get a glimpse of a possible scenario. Despite the fact that the largest number of Punjabi native speakers live in Pakistan, Sabiha Mansoor (1993: 126f.), for example, points out that Punjabi mother tongue students tend to neglect their mother language, which many consider to be inferior to Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. This condition is mainly caused by the exclusivist language policy of the Pakistani state, which leaves little space for other languages (cf. Ayres 2009) even though Urdu is spoken natively by less than 8% of its population (Government of Pakistan 1998b) – primarily by the so-called *Muhajirs*, i.e. descendants of people who migrated to this part of South Asia from Urdu-speaking regions of India, mostly during the partition of 1947. On the one hand, Urdu serves as a *lingua franca* in multilingual Pakistan

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<sup>6</sup> This figure is based on official data of the Government of Pakistan derived from the 1998 census. By now, the number of Punjabi mother tongue speakers must have increased, considering the high population growth in general. This is also the case for the figures of language speakers taken from the Indian census of 2001.

but, on the other hand, it also degrades other languages due to the lack of official recognition and public support for these. In India, by contrast, besides the eminent role language and script play for Sikhs (who, nowadays, predominantly live in India), another important step for establishing Punjabi as a vibrant functional language was its declaration as an official language of the newly created state of Punjab in 1966. Until then, Urdu had been the main language of administration as well as education in this part of the Punjab, but now, on the back of government support, it was replaced with Punjabi written in Gurmukhi (Jeffrey 1997: 444).

Although India's language policy is obviously more inclusive than that of Pakistan, I argue that it was the Gurmukhi script that made it possible for Punjabi to attain its present-day status in India. Compared to Muslim Punjabi speakers in Pakistan, who do not use their language as proudly as Sikh speakers in India, Punjabi in India is not only considered an important part of Sikh religion and culture, it is also gaining steadily in popularity even outside of its community, for instance through usage in Bollywood songs. Moreover, without Gurmukhi, Punjabi ran the risk of being categorized as a dialect of another language (viz. Hindi), and, in this sense, the script led to its fixation as an independent language. By contrast, the language of the Hindus in the region has been officially classified as a dialect of Hindi. As this example shows, Hindi is not unreasonably considered by many to be a threat to other languages.

**3. URDU: LANGUAGE WEAKENING DUE TO SCRIPT POLITICS.** Urdu is the prime example of a language in India whose functional role has suffered due to the rise of Hindi as we know it today (cf. Oesterheld 2006).<sup>7</sup> The genesis of this development can be traced back to the 19th century (cf. King 1994). As with many other processes of identity formation, the 19th century was decisive for the growing importance of script. Various factors which served the purpose of creating and strengthening the idea of a nation gained

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<sup>7</sup> While promoting Hindi in the form of Khari Boli as a "national" language, the official language policy in India continues to apply the term "Hindi" to other languages as well. Through this subsumption of the old terminology for a group of related languages under the new terminology relating to one particular language, all the other languages have effectively been relegated to the status of dialects (and thus sub-standard forms) of Khari Boli-Hindi, which is now also referred to as "Standard" or "Modern Hindi".

in relevance during the time of national awakening in colonial India. In this process, script attained an unprecedented significance with the increasing importance of formal education, literacy, history in general and, above all, the history of literature. The increasing importance of script in British India eventually led to the separation of Hindi and Urdu, based first and foremost on their diverging scripts. The Perso-Arabic script, the dominant script for the language known under several terms – for instance Hindi, Hindustani and Urdu – was identified as foreign and Muslim, whereas the Nagari script served the demands of the awakened Hindi-speaking Hindu elite in search of an authentic Indian identity.

The history of the separation of Hindi and Urdu is well documented and shall not be repeated here, but, in the context of this article, it must be noted that the rise of Hindi in Nagari script enriched with Sanskrit vocabulary took place to the detriment of Urdu. Urdu today is far from being a dying language due to its high number of mother tongue speakers in India and its dominant status as a national language in Pakistan. Yet, the production of literature in this language and, above all, its functional role has been on a steady decline in India (especially in the birth region of Urdu) ever since the Nagari script de facto replaced the Perso-Arabic script in many domains (cf. Orsini 2002). The dominance of Nagari as the script for the language formerly known as Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani, which facilitated the rise of Modern Hindi as we know it today in independent India, can indeed be considered the main reason for the decline of Urdu as a literary and functional language in India. A further reason might be seen in the usage of Nagari for texts hitherto available only or primarily in the Perso-Arabic script; this can, though it need not, lead to a reclassification of Urdu texts as Hindi literature.

**4.1. SCRIPT AS A DEMARCATOR BETWEEN LANGUAGES.** While Hindi and Urdu have a single origin and are justly called by many scholars one language with two scripts (cf. King 1994),<sup>8</sup> they are officially listed as two separate languages by the Indian state. However, other languages that share

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the diverging scripts, the vocabulary of Hindi and Urdu vary at the formal level. Hindi prefers words of Sanskrit origin, while Urdu draws extensively from Perso-Arabic and, in a few cases, Turkic sources. However, in daily life, speakers of both languages might not even realize that they speak two “different” languages.

the same script with Hindi, such as Awadhi, Bhojpuri or Braj Bhasha, are today classified as dialects of Hindi, though they have their own literary history and, unlike Urdu, differ from Modern Hindi in grammar and syntax. Another language which was for a long time categorized as a dialect of Hindi is Maithili (Mishra 1976: 19f.). It was only in 2003, after long agitations by Maithili supporters, that it was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and thus gained official status as a language. Though the fact that nowadays these four languages share the same script with Hindi is certainly not the only reason why they are/were categorized as dialects, this circumstance has surely made it easier. In Nepal, by contrast, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and Hindi are officially classed as different languages.

In this context, one could also point to Gujarati, which, written in its own script, is classified as a language in its own right, whereas the allied speeches of Rajasthan, today usually written in the Nagari script, are considered to be dialects<sup>9</sup> of Hindi (in the Indian census, for instance) despite the fact that they are linguistically closer to Gujarati.

The obvious endeavors of the Indian state to declare as many languages as possible to be dialects of Hindi – in order to strengthen the numerical basis of Hindi and hence the case for its potential role as the national language – constitute a special case. But other examples show how a language which is contiguous to another language with a strong literary tradition (real or constructed), and with which it shares the same script, often comes to be referred to as a dialect of the dominant language.

**4.2. THE CASE OF KONKANI AND MARATHI.** Konkani, an Indo-Aryan language with around 2.5 million native speakers (Government of India 2001), is the official language of the Indian Union state of Goa, which was a Portuguese overseas territory until 1961. Although Goa is the bastion of Konkani, it is also spoken in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. Because of the scattered distribution of Konkani and the various religious affiliations

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<sup>9</sup> In the 2001 Indian census, languages which feature in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution are listed as main categories, while languages without independent status are categorized as “mother tongues” of these languages, e.g. Rajasthani and Marwari are called “mother tongues” of Hindi. Notably, Hindi has 49 (+ others) mother tongues, whereas Gujarati has only 3 (+ others). Interestingly, the term “dialect” is avoided in these listings, though the systematization actually points out that “mother tongue” is here rather used as a synonym for “dialect”.



of its speakers, it is written in several scripts (though religious demarcations are not as strict as implied here): in the Nagari script by Hindus in Goa and Maharashtra, in the Kannada script in Karnataka, in the Malayalam script in Kerala, in the Roman script by Christians particularly in Goa, and in a variant of the Perso-Arabic script by Muslims in Kerala.

Goa was dominated for centuries by the Portuguese, resulting in the spread of the Portuguese language and a neglect of Konkani, which was, additionally, furthered by the dominance of Marathi in the religious literature of Goan Hindus. Nevertheless, Konkani has a long literary tradition of its own (cf. Gomes 1997), which provided an important argument for a Konkani agitation from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. After Goa's independence from Portugal in the 1960s, this movement gained momentum. At that time, the biggest opponent of Konkani became Marathi. Marathi supporters have been claiming to this day that Konkani is nothing but one of its dialects, backing this with the fact that most Hindus in Goa use Nagari and, additionally, have a good command of Marathi. After Konkani was officially recognized as an independent language in 1975 by the Sahitya Akademi, India's national literature academy, it became the official language of Goa (in the Nagari script) in 1987. Nowadays, Konkani and its literature in various scripts is in a rather poor state due to the pressure of Marathi and English, which are indispensable for social upward mobility, and the lack of education opportunities in Konkani. However, its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 1992 ensures state sponsorship and its continuing status as an independent language – though predominantly for Konkani in Nagari, according to Konkani activists advocating other scripts (Menezes 2012).

**4.3. BENGALI AND ITS 'DIALECTS'.** Bengali is the dominant language in the eastern part of South Asia, taking into account its rich literary history and its role as a vital functional language. Although it is spoken mainly in Bangladesh and the Indian Union state of West Bengal, its geographical spread extends far beyond these modern state borders. For instance, Tripura is also predominantly Bengali-speaking. Its script is officially classified as "Bengali" by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The script, which is used for several languages such as Assamese, Bengali and Bishnupriya, has an entry in the online list of *Codes for the representation of names of*



despite the fact that other languages are also written in the same script. Some minor differences notwithstanding, Assamese, for example, shares the same script with Bengali and, under British rule, was at first classified as a dialect of it regardless of its own rich literary tradition. George Abraham Grierson stated that the literary tradition of Assamese was the main argument in favor of classifying it at last as an independent language, even though he claimed that, linguistically, it was indeed a dialect of Bengali (Grierson 1968: 393f.).

Other languages which are often considered to be dialects of Bengali include Bishnupriya and Chakma. Both are Indo-Aryan languages related to Assamese and Bengali and spoken in various parts of North East India and Bangladesh. They are predominantly written in the same script as Assamese and Bengali, although Chakma has an own script.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Grierson classified Chakma as a Bengali dialect in his *Linguistic Survey of India* (Grierson 1968: 321). Whereas Chakma is still officially categorized as a Bengali “mother tongue” in the Indian census (Government of India 2001), i.e. as a dialect (see footnote 9), it has successfully shaken off this classification in Bangladesh, seemingly also by emphasizing possession of its own script. Chakma in its unique script is said to have been reintroduced first of all in non-government schools in Bangladesh; however, published sources on this are missing. After the language and its script were also introduced in schools in Chakma areas of the Indian Union state of Mizoram, the government of the state of Tripura also decided to introduce this script for Chakma schools in 2012 (Anonymous 2012). Script, in this case, serves not only as an important identity marker, but also as a demarcator from the dominant languages of the region, and maybe, ultimately, as a stabilizer of the Chakma language; but the standard of literacy in the Chakma script seems to be still too low, in Bangladesh as well as in India, to draw any conclusions.

**5. MEITEI: THE REVIVAL OF A UNIQUE SCRIPT.** It is similarly difficult to predict the consequences of the introduction of the Meitei Mayek script for Meitei in the Indian Union state of Manipur. Meitei or Meiteilon (officially: Manipuri), a Sino-Tibetan language with around 1.5 million mother tongue

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*scripts* of the International Organization for Standardization under the name Bengali (code: Beng; number: 325), while there is no entry for Assamese in the list.

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction to the Chakma script, see e.g. Grierson (1968: 321-323).

speakers (Government of India 2001), is not only the most widely spoken language but also the lingua franca of Manipur. Although Meitei has not been categorized as a dialect of another language, it is nonetheless considered to be under permanent pressure from the dominant languages of North East India – Assamese and Bengali. In addition to Bengali loanwords in modern Meitei, another important argument in this regard is that the Bengali script was allegedly forced upon the Meitei language from the beginning of the 18th century. The introduction of the Bengali script ultimately led to the disappearance of the Meitei script (Aggarwal 1997: 444).

Since the 1930s, various agents have been trying to re-establish a script for Meitei based on the old Meitei Mayek script but, to this day, the various lobby groups do not agree on the number of letters.<sup>12</sup> Although the Manipur state government has approved the Meitei Mayek with 27 letters and introduced it widely in school textbooks from 2005 onwards, one consequence of the ongoing controversy is that Meitei and its script have not yet been included on the Indian currency note (Singh 2011: 28), even though Meitei was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution already in 1992 – as Manipuri, which continues to be its official designation. The revival of a unique script and the renaming of Meitei as Manipuri serve the purpose of strengthening Meitei nationalism under the cloak of Manipuri identity, which might, in the long run, lead to the decline of other languages spoken in the linguistically heterogeneous state of Manipur.

The dominance of Meitei and its script is already contested by several other language groups. For instance, the relabelling of Meitei as Manipuri was strongly opposed by speakers of the Indo-Aryan language Bishnupriya. Bishnupriya lobbyists argued that theirs was the true Manipuri language, and Meitei was only Meitei. One reason for the success of Meitei in this dispute was its higher number of native speakers. For Bishnupriya, only 77,545 mother language speakers are listed in the Indian census of 2001. The implementation of Meitei Mayek in Manipur in 2005 was opposed, among others, by the All Naga Students Association of Manipur (ANSAM), whose members feared that the script might also be forced upon them (Laithangbam 2005). Other languages in Manipur are still written mainly in

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<sup>12</sup> For more details regarding the controversy on the number of letters in the Meitei Mayek see Singh (2011), which includes samples of the 18 (ibid.: 26) and 27 (ibid.: 29) letter script.

the Roman script, but also in the Bengali script. The overall implementation of the Meitei Mayek would, on the one hand, give the peoples of Manipur a distinct identity and emphasize their uniqueness in contrast to the dominant Assamese and Bengali cultures. On the other hand, however, it would give Meitei an even more important role than it already has, thus contributing to the degradation of other languages written in the Bengali and Roman scripts.

Today, Meitei is, besides English, the only official language of Manipur, and one can observe a growing trend of teaching it in Meitei Mayek in government schools, as well as the emergence of this script in the public sphere. The state-sponsored spread of the Meitei Mayek in Manipur might lead, in the near future, to a scenario in which Meitei plays the role not only of a dominant but also of a dominating language, and the languages of ethnic minorities might be even more neglected. Furthermore, since Meitei is a rather unimportant language at the national level, students who wish to pursue higher education and obtain jobs in administration will still need to learn an additional language and script, such as Bengali, English or Hindi. This could ultimately lead native speakers of minority languages, who strive for social upward mobility, to neglect their mother tongue. The strengthening of Meitei, with the help of a unique script, could hence encourage the demise of minority languages in Manipur, especially the already endangered languages of the hill tribes.

**6. WRITING AND SCRIPT AS SYMBOLS OF ‘HIGH CULTURE’.** Groups which are labeled as “tribes”<sup>13</sup> often fear the loss of their languages as well as other parts of their cultures, and hence search for ways to strengthen their identities. The most important factors to demarcate one group from another are not only real or perceived present-day differences, but also a real or constructed history which is not shared with any other group. While so-called tribes often center their uniqueness around religious and cultural rituals, festivals and narratives of origin, in the last hundred years language and, above all, written texts have also gained in importance. The search

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<sup>13</sup> The term “tribe” is highly contested by many people labeled as “tribals” as well as by scholars, who point out that this was a category introduced by the British (cf. Jain 2005). Nonetheless, it is still an official category in India, as in “Scheduled Tribe”, which is why I use it, especially in the context of language politics.

for a written literary history among minorities which so far only had oral literary traditions can be observed in various regions of South Asia today. For instance, during his field studies in North East India, Stuart Blackburn observed that several tribes, including the Bodos, tell their very own story of lost writing.<sup>14</sup> While such stories vary in extent and detail, they all seem to serve the same purpose: to compensate for a feeling of inferiority for lacking a written tradition like other surrounding cultures. Blackburn states that

[a]lthough the story [of lost writing] claims possession of writing in the past, it is really about loss in the present, a feeling of exclusion from dominant neighbors, who have now become nation-states. It is a local and oral counterpoint to the official and written list of the national languages. (Blackburn 2010: 309)

More and more so-called tribes compensate for this feeling of inferiority not only with stories of lost writing, but also with the invention of their very own scripts.

**6.1. SANTALI AND ITS INVENTED SCRIPT.** The most prominent example of script invention among the so-called tribes of South Asia is that of Santali, which has around 6.5 million speakers (Government of India 2001). In the course of history, the Santals not only settled in several Indian states, but can today also be found in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Literacy was spread only in the 19th century among them by missionaries who printed the first Santali publications, such as the Bible, in the Roman script. Nowadays, Santali is written also in the Ol Chiki, Nagari, Bengali and Oriya scripts. The use of the last three depends on the dominant language and script of the respective country or Indian Union state (Murmu 2002: 242).

Santali is an Austro-Asiatic language with a phonology different from that of the languages from which it has borrowed these scripts. In 1941, the Santal nationalist and linguist Raghunath Murmu created a script exclusively for Santali (Singh 1982: 237) – the Ol or Ol Chiki script (also Ol Cemet), which is, in contrast to most Indian scripts, an alphabetic and not a syllabic script. It seems obvious that, besides the allegedly more accurate

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<sup>14</sup> For examples, see Blackburn (2008) and Gaenzle (2007).

rendering of the Santali phonemes, the choice of this writing system was also influenced by the currency of the alphabetic Roman script among the Santals. But the invention of this new script served yet another purpose:

The introduction of Ol Chiki could serve as a link among Santals of various states who had a common distinct culture which faces the danger of extinction. (Singh 1982: 239)

Additionally, with this new script Raghunath Murmu also laid the foundation for a distinctive written literary tradition which he himself started with several publications, including mythological stories of the Santals (Lotz 2007: 235).

As he [Raghunath Murmu] saw it, every respectable high-culture language in India has its own distinct script and an old (written) literature. (Zide 1969: 425)

Since then, many educated Santal activists have been trying to establish Ol Chiki as the only script for Santali in the whole of India; Santals in other countries seem to be excluded from these endeavors. But even in India only a small number accept the Ol Chiki script, for various reasons. Barbara Lotz wrote about the diverse formal difficulties in implementing Ol Chiki in Orissa, but also about the reservations of Santals themselves against the script and against Santali in general:

[T]he imposition of the mother tongue (plus script!) [...] is perceived as an instrument of further marginalization by the learners, who feel they are put to an even more disadvantaged position in view of the additional language burden, as they will eventually have to cope with three languages: Oriya, Hindi and English. The introduction of the tribal mother tongue is acceptable for the learners only as an initial bridge medium of instruction; if it extends to a full course including script, grammar and literature, hardly any learner is willing to devote much time for it, especially as no job market is available for this specialized knowledge. (Lotz 2004: 136f.)

Although the West Bengal government recognized Ol Chiki as the script for Santali as early as 1981 (Singh 1982: 239), a similar situation applies in this part of India as well as in Bihar and Jharkhand. In addition to the general lack of educational opportunities for Santali in Ol Chiki, the reservations of

Santali speakers against this script are overwhelming, and therefore they continue to write Santali in its various other scripts – Bengali, Nagari, Oriya and Roman.

The situation regarding Santali and its scripts in the various Indian Union states is the reason why, like Meitei, Santali still does not feature on the Indian currency note despite the fact that it was listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution in 2003. Nonetheless, the Ol Chiki project of Raghunath Murmu still seems partly successful due to the continuous production of books and magazines in this script – even though only on a low level. But only an in-depth study and future developments will be able to tell us more.

**6.2. OTHER HISTORIC EXAMPLES OF SCRIPT INVENTION.** Other well-known examples of script invention in the 20th century include the Ho language and the claim of an old script (nowadays known as Varang Kshiti) which was said to have been re-discovered in the 1950s by Lakho Bodra, a Ho himself and a driving figure of Ho nationalism (Singh 1982: 240f.). For Gondi, a Dravidian language, a script was invented in 1928 (Pandey 2012: 1), and for Sora, an Austro-Asiatic language, a script called Sorang Sompeng in 1936. In contrast to Santali, the endeavors to establish the scripts for Ho, Gondi and Sora have been comparatively unsuccessful until now (Daniels 2008: 305). There seem to be neither a considerable production of literature in these scripts, nor movements in their support worth mentioning. Santali, with its invented script, and Meitei, with its revived script, seem to be exceptions rather than the rule.

**6.3. SCRIPT INVENTION TODAY.** There is a lack of studies on recent script inventions, which makes it necessary to rely mostly on internet sources in order to get an impression of recent initiatives. This short overview hence does not claim to be complete, and it is impossible at this moment to predict whether the activities described will have any impact at all. Nonetheless, it indicates that the idea of script as an identity marker seems to experience unbroken popularity in South Asia, especially in India. But whereas in the past the main actors in the field of script invention/revival were the language communities in question, nowadays supporters and initiators come from diverse backgrounds.

One activist in the field of script inventions is Prasanna Sree. According to an online newspaper article (Vishnu 2010), she comes from a tribal community but is socially and economically well-off, and is today a professor of English Literature at Andhra University in Visakhapatnam (Andhra Pradesh). In addition to her university position, she also engages in activities for the welfare of various small tribes. In a newspaper interview about her endeavors to preserve the languages of various tribal groups, i.e. Adivasis<sup>15</sup>, she stated in 2010:

Adivasis have always waited on the threshold of progress. All outsiders who have conquered them have made Adivasis run from themselves. English education is the latest culprit. I devised scripts for something Adivasis desperately need – a cultural renaissance. (Vishnu 2010)

So far, Prasanna Sree has devised 18 scripts which are given on her website (Sree n.d.). Some remind us of existing scripts, while others seem to be based on completely new designs. Sree claims that some scripts are already taught in various tribal villages. According to the article quoted above, the Gondis were especially eager to demand the approval of their language and own script, modified by Sree, by the government of Andhra Pradesh and its introduction in schools, in 2010.

In the same article, we learn about another supporter of minority languages who, according to this and another article (Sunavala 2012), has created scripts for 11 languages which had only oral traditions until then. Ganesh Devy (Ganesh N. Devy or G. N. Devy) is a prominent scholar of English Literature from Gujarat, where he has also established the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre aimed at the preservation of small, previously strictly oral languages. Devy's scripts, in contrast with Sree's, are very close to the Nagari and Gujarati scripts. He defended his choice in an interview: "Scripts are not sacred. Language scripts are like a

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<sup>15</sup> The term "Adivasi" refers to groups which are officially listed as "Scheduled Tribes" in India. While currently the term "tribe" may bear a rather negative connotation, "Adivasi" (e.g. Hindi: *ādivāsī*, Bengali: *ādibāsī*, literally 'original inhabitant') is often preferred by Scheduled Tribes as a self-affiliation, especially in the field of rights discourses. However, the term is not accepted by most ethnic groups in North East India, who prefer to refer to themselves as "tribes" or only by their group names.



camera. The language is what forms a universe.” In the interview he also pointed out that Ol Chiki for Santali “took nearly a century to reach its currently thriving state” and Prasanna Sree’s “scripts will face just as many challenges” (Vishnu 2010). Unfortunately, an overview of his scripts is not available online but, judging from written samples of the tribal languages Devy publishes on the website of the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, we get the impression that these, e.g. Ahirani, Chaudhuri, Dehwali, Dungri Bhili, etc., are written in Nagari or Gujarati script, or maybe slightly modified variants (Anonymous n.d.).

In North East India, the Naga Script Literature Central Board (NSLCB) came forward with an invented Naga script in 2010. Allegedly, this script was revealed by a person called Laokeinang Phaomi in 1958 (Shapwon 2007: 120f.). One supporter claimed that this script “could be a bond to unify all Nagas scattered all over the country and beyond” (Anonymous 2010a). This statement reminds us of the invention of the Ol Chiki script for Santali. But, while the Santals form an ethnic group, though not as homogeneous as imagined, “Naga” is a label for a range of diverse ethnic groups in Northeast India that speak diverse languages and use a hitherto non-standardized (but relatively stable) creole based on Assamese (often called Nagamese) to communicate among each other. Hence, the implementation of this script will be rather difficult, and was criticized by members of other Naga groups – by Konyaks (Anonymous 2010b) and Kyongs (Anonymous 2010c) – only a few weeks after the plans of the NSLCB were made public.

A similarly difficult situation occurs in Arunachal Pradesh, where Tony Koyu designed a script for the various languages of this Indian Union state. He unveiled the Tani Lipi script in 2001 and, since then, has gained attention from the media, scholars (cf. Barbora & Post 2008) and representatives of the government of Arunachal Pradesh (Taikam 2010). The main aim behind the development of this script is that of strengthening the bond between the various ethnic groups by providing at least a common script for their diverse languages. The project has received positive as well as negative reactions from various groups and individuals and has, probably for that reason, not yet been officially approved. Until now, it seems to have been implemented only by smaller, privately financed initiatives.

Tim Brookes, an American script enthusiast who runs a website called Endangered Alphabets, launched a project called Endangered Alphabets II:

Saving Languages in Bangladesh, which aims at printing children's books in languages and scripts from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, i.e. "Mro, Marma, Tripura, Chakma and others" (Brookes 2012). In order to raise funds, he asked for support via the social fund-raising website Kickstarter and managed to collect 11,051 dollars donated by 266 people (ibid.). On his Kickstarter page, we read the following:

Now a new and urgent Endangered Alphabets situation has arisen, in a region of southern Bangladesh called the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This upland and forested area is home to 13 different indigenous peoples, each of which has its own genetic identity, its history and cultural traditions, and many of which their own language and even their own script. (Brookes 2012)

**7. SUMMARY.** The recent script initiatives listed above show that script still has and may even have been gaining more importance in the last decades. In general, the endeavors of so-called tribes in South Asia for their own script, and ultimately an individual literary history, seem to serve three purposes. On the one hand, an ethnic group without a literary tradition often seems, from today's perspective, an incomplete nation, so various so-called tribes have tried and still try to compensate for this by creating or searching for their own written texts. A literary tradition in a unique script appears to fulfill the alleged demands of a "high culture" entirely, at least in South Asia, where many rich literary languages have their own script. Santali, with its script Ol Chiki, is a prominent example of this function. Interestingly, supporters external to these communities have recently joined in, such as Prasanna Sree among tribes mainly in Andhra Pradesh, or Tim Brookes among ethnic minorities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

Secondly, a specific literary tradition can help to demarcate one language from another, and ultimately even stabilize it as a vibrant literary and functional language. The case of Chakma – a language often still considered to be a dialect of Bengali – is an interesting example whose recent developments need to be studied in depth.

A third, and quite recent, purpose for the invention of scripts is that script may serve as a unifier of various ethnic groups in either a single Indian Union state, such as Arunachal Pradesh, or an imagined community consisting of several ethnic groups, such as the Nagas. Here, script is

expected to play an integrative role on a sub-national level, in opposition to scripts which are already associated with strong identities of other dominant groups, examples being the Assamese and Bengali scripts associated with Assamese and Bengali ethnicity in North East India; the Roman script with Christianity; and Nagari with Hindi, which aspires to national language status in India and privileged association with Sanskrit and thus Hinduism.

It is evident that script is a very important identity marker for a host of ethnic groups in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.<sup>16</sup> What role scripts will finally play for them depends on various factors, such as acceptance by community members, compatibility with the languages, non-governmental support or, and above all, governmental support.

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<sup>16</sup> Though I abstain in this article from listing examples from Nepal, there are several interesting cases of script invention and revival in that country, including the Akkha, Jenticha, Kirat Rai, Limbu, and Tikamuli scripts.

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